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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis that verbal humor may serve as a technique of social influence was tested for the first time under experimental conditions. Humor-moderating attempts at social influence and an examination of potential intervening variables tested the prediction that verbal humor would produce compliance. In a dyadic bargaining paradigm, at a predetermined point in the negotiation, subjects received a demand (from a confederate) that varied in size and was administered in either a humorous or a non-humorous way. Results supported the major hypothesis that humor would result in an increased proportional concession. While sex differences, size of demand and possible intervening variables produced different responses, they did not affect compliance. Humor increased concession amounts, the subject's laughter and liking for the task, while marginally lowering self-reported tension. Where tension-reduction and liking of the partner are important mediators, humor, therefore, may prove helpful. (Author/LS)

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Eliciting Compliance: Humor as a Technique of Social Control

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While sociologists and anthropologists have often speculated that humor is a technique of social control (e.g., Brant, 1948; Elliott, 1960; Goffman, 1967; Goodrich, Henry and Goodrich, 1954; Martineau, 1972; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940; Stephenson, 1951), this proposed relationship has never been examined directly. The present study experimentally tests the effects of humor on the social influence process.

The experimental social psychological literature suggests many directions for examining moderators of the potential humor-social influence relationship. Bales (1950), following a widely-held position in the humor literature, categorized humor as a tension-reduction device which facilitates group process, while from Brehm (1966) we can derive the possibility that humor lessens restrictions on the sense of freedom produced by the influence attempt. Gruner (1976) indicated that humor increased liking for a speaker, and Goffman (1967) proposed that humor may allow the influenced person the chance to save face by redefining the influence situation.[1]

Given the degree of speculation and the array of possible intervening variables in the literature, it is clearly time first to establish whether humor, in fact, does moderate attempts at social influence and second, to begin to examine potential intervening variables that might underlie this relationship.

Thus, the major purpose of the present study was to test the prediction that the use of verbal humor by an influence agent would result in more compliance on the part of the individual toward whom it was directed.

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A bargaining paradigm was chosen to test this relationship because it represented a flexible, realistic and involving interaction situation which nevertheless permitted extensive experimental controls. To examine the prediction, at a predetermined point in a dyadic bargaining task, subjects received a demand from a confederate that was administered in either a humorous or non-humorous way.

Sex of interactants and size of the demand for subject concession also were varied. The literature on sex differences in bargaining (e.g., Terhune, 1970; Tedeschi, Schlenker, and Bonoma, 1973) led to the prediction of a sex of subject X demand interaction; more specifically, that females would concede more than males in the small demand condition and would concede less than males in the large demand condition.

Method

Subjects and confederates

Subjects were 122 male and 130 female undergraduate students at a large midwestern university. Confederates, who also served as experimenters and observers, were eight male and five female undergraduate students from the same university. Subjects were assigned to conditions by a table of random numbers and experimenters and observers were blind to the condition prior to the independent manipulation.

Materials

A pilot study was conducted to determine a non-sex-related commodity over which to bargain (Sistrunk and McDavid, 1971). A painting was selected as the most androgynous bargaining object.

Subject and confederate confronted each other across a bargaining table

placed so that each of them faced a one-way mirror covered with cloth. Two observers seated in another room recorded the frequency of the subject's laughter, smiling and verbalization responses both before and after the independent manipulation. The experimenter recorded the lengths of the pre- and post-influence bargaining sessions on stopwatches. A 30-item post-experimental questionnaire was used to assess the subject's affective state and his/her perceptions of the influence agent and the task.

Design

The design was a 2 (presence/absence of humorous communication) X 3 (small, medium or large demand for subject concession) X 2 (sex of subject) X 2 (sex of confederate) factorial.

Procedure

Confederate and subject arrived independently and were escorted to the experimental room, where a faked draw assigned the subject to the position of "Buyer." The task was for the subject and confederate to reach agreement on the price of a landscape painting. The confederate was provided with a list of prompts to handle various contingencies. The subject was assigned a starting bid $45,000 lower than the confederate's ("Seller's) initial bid.

The free bargaining session was over when the subject and the confederate had bargained to within $10,000 of each other. At this point, the experimenter called the time limit; immediately afterward, the confederate made the independent manipulation. In the non-humorous condition, he/she stated, "Well, my final offer is $____." In the humorous condition, the manipulation was "Well, my final offer is $____, and I'll throw in my pet frog." (smile). The offer was made by asking the subject for a small

(3,000), medium ($6,000) or large ($9,000) concession. Thus, the confederate's bid dropped either $7,000, $4,000 or $1,000. Bargaining then continued until agreement was reached. A post-experimental questionnaire used to examine possible mediating variables such as liking for partner and task, self-perception of tension, and perceived restriction of bargaining freedom, was administered immediately after final agreement was reached.

Dependent measures were proportional amount of concession to the confederate's demand, amount of final agreement, and pre- and post-manipulation measures of the length of the bargaining session and frequencies of the subject's laughter, smiling and verbalization.

Results and Discussion

Two multivariate analyses of variance were performed (Finn, 1974). The questionnaire variables were analyzed separately from the behavioral measures because of the logical and qualitative distinction between them.

Behavioral measures

The major finding was a significant multivariate main effect for humor, F (10, 219) = 8.67, $p < .0001$. The principal test of the hypothesis showed that subjects in the humor condition made a larger proportional concession than subjects who did not receive an implicit demand accompanied by humor, F (1, 228) = 4.59, $p < .04$. The manipulation check demonstrated that subjects in the humor condition laughed more after the manipulation than no-humor subjects F (1, 228) = 60.09, $p < .0001$. See Table 1.

A second significant multivariate main effect was found for demand, F (20, 438) = 3.84, $p < .0001$. Examination of the univariate F's and univariate tests revealed that subjects made a larger proportional concession

in the small demand condition than in the medium or large demand cells, F (1, 228) = 15.02, $p < .0001$, which did not differ from each other. Subjects in the large demand condition spoke more, F (1, 228) = 26.77, $p < .0001$, and bargained longer, F (1, 228) = 15.73, $p < .0001$, after the manipulation than those in the medium condition, who in turn spoke more and bargained longer than those in the small demand condition. Subjects smiled least in the small demand condition, F (1, 228) = 4.31, $p < .02$, and laughed least in the medium demand condition, F (1, 228) = 4.93, $p < .008$. No interaction between humor and demand was found.

The multivariate main effect for subject sex, F (10, 219) = 3.98, $p < .0001$, also was significant. The variable of greatest interest in this experiment, the amount of financial concession, showed no sex differences, however. This finding is consistent with and provides support for the findings of Sistrunk and McDavid (1971) that males and females do not differ in the amount of conformity on androgynous tasks. Females both smiled, F (1, 228) = 9.05, $p < .003$, and laughed, F (1, 228) = 11.28, $p < .001$, more than males prior to the independent manipulation. Males took longer to reach agreement after the manipulation than females, F (1, 228) = 5.40, $p < .03$. Females laughed more after the manipulation than males, F (1, 228) = 14.71, $p < .0002$.

Questionnaire variables and partial correlations

Factor analyses and reliability analyses of the post-experimental questionnaire yielded three factors which dealt with the subject's liking for his/her partner, the subject's liking for the bargaining task, and the subject's self-perceptions of tension or nervousness.

Results from a MANOVA using the factor scores from the factor analysis

as input dependent measures indicated a multivariate main effect for humor, F (3, 226) =3.17, $p < .03$. Humor subjects liked the task more, F (1, 228) = 6.02, $p < .02$, and were marginally less nervous, F (1, 228) = 3.64, $p < .06$, than no-humor subjects. There were no effects for the liking for partner variable.

The relationship between humor and the amount of concession was not significantly affected by partialling out the liking for partner variable, the liking for task variable, the self-perceived nervousness variable, nor any combination of the three. Nor was the relationship attenuated when the variable, frequency of laughter after the manipulation, was partialled out.

The Sex X Demand interaction, predicted on the basis of the bargaining literature, was not found. However, this lack of significance could have been a result of the androgynous nature of the object over which subjects bargained (Sistrunk and McDavid, 1972). In addition, this result could have been due to the failure of the demand variable to manipulate the perceived cooperativeness of the partner.

Taking these results as a whole, humor was shown to increase the amount of concession, the subject's laughter, and the subject's liking for the task while self-reported tension was marginally lessened. Thus, the results of this experiment provide confirmation for the many speculations that humor serves as a technique of social control. In addition, the results of the present study are helpful in the investigation of potential mediators of this relationship. If a tension-reduction model held, the humor-compliance relationship should have been attenuated by partialling out the tension variable. If liking for the partner were the mediator, again the humor-compliance relationship should have been attenuated. However, the humor-

compliance correlation remained stable when tension and liking for partner were partialled out. If perceived lessening of freedom restriction were the mediator, a different factor structure should have emerged from the factor analysis. Therefore, future research on the mediators of the humor-compliance relationship might examine the suggestion of Goffman (1967) and Zijderveld (1968) that jokes represent important pieces of social reality, which may serve to redefine the situation for an individual.

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Footnotes

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[1]The experimental evidence regarding the humor-influence relationship (Cupchik & Leventhal, 1974; Leventhal & Cupchik, 1975; Markiewicz, 1974; Nosanchuk & Lightstone, 1974) deals either with ratings of cartoons or the effects of humor upon the persuasiveness of messages. These studies do not examine the use of humor in social interaction.

Table 1

Significant Effects of Humor, Size of Demand and Sex on Behavioral Measures

Independent Variables	Behavioral Measures: Proportional Concession	Prelaugh	Presmile	Postlaugh	Postsmile	Post-Verbalization	Postime
Humor	.53	1.34	1.98	.68	.24	2.08	40.39
No humor	.45	1.06	1.87	.12	.17	2.20	35.57
Small demand	.63	1.12	1.75	.48	.10	1.45	26.12
Medium demand	.46	1.06	2.05	.25	.26	2.25	38.94
Large demand	.37	1.42	1.98	.48	.25	2.73	49.06
Male	.49	.79	1.66	.26	.21	2.18	42.00
Female	.49	1.58	2.17	.53	.20	2.10	34.24

Note: All table entries except the first and last columns are frequencies. The proportional concession is defined as the raw dollar amount of concession on the bid following the independent manipulation relative to the total concession possible. Postime is tabulated in seconds.